

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



News Release

Great Lakes - Big Rivers Region External Affairs Office

**Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building, 1 Federal Drive, Ft. Snelling, MN 55111-4056
612/713-5360 Fax: 612/713-5280 <http://midwest.fws.gov>**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 12, 2005

EA 05-57

Contacts:

Don Hultman, refuge manager 507-494-6218

Scott Flaherty, External Affairs 612-713-5309

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge to Prepare New Management Alternative this Fall for Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan

The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge will be drafting a new "preferred alternative" for its Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today.

Refuge Manager Don Hultman said the new alternative will be issued this fall as a supplement to the current draft plan and impact statement and will be prepared following the end of the current public comment period which ends August 31, 2005.

"We have listened to nearly 2,600 people in 17 public meetings and workshops to date in communities up and down the refuge, and it is clear that preparing a new preferred alternative would be in the best interest of the resource and people we serve," Hultman said.

He said the new alternative, known as "Alternative E," will likely be issued in October. The public will be given 45 days for review and comment. As a supplement to the impact statement, the new alternative will be 30-40 pages, and follow the format of the existing alternatives.

Hultman stressed that work on the new preferred alternative will not begin until after the current comment period ends so that full consideration can be given to all comments and ideas the public offers at three upcoming workshops or in writing.

"Public comments on management alternatives contained in the draft CCP are still very important to us, and will contribute to the formulation of a new preferred alternative," Hultman said. "We've been getting excellent input from people participating in our workshops and would like that to continue."

-MORE-

The remaining public workshops will be held in Lansing, Iowa; Cassville, Wis., and Dubuque, Iowa in mid-July. Meetings with the Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois departments of natural resources and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers districts are also scheduled in the coming weeks prior to the end of the comment period.

"I think this additional step in the process shows that people's comments are being heard. We hope people will continue to provide their thoughts and ideas about this draft plan," Hultman said. He noted that the four existing alternatives in the draft plan, ranging from no action to the wildlife and integrated public use alternative, will still remain part of the overall document and carry forward to the final environmental impact statement.

"We will basically be considering five alternatives versus the current four," he said.

Hultman said the new alternative would cover all 41 objectives or issues addressed in the current draft plan and be available on the refuge's planning website. He said it has not yet been decided whether the entire supplement would be mailed to the several thousand people on the planning mailing list or if everyone would get a shorter summary of the changes.

Hultman said the preparation of a new preferred alternative also in effect extends the review period for the entire draft plan for about three months since the comment period will "re-open" when the supplement is released. He said the refuge would likely host open houses this fall in several communities during the new 45-day comment period.

The comprehensive plan, when completed, will guide management and administration of the refuge for the next 15 years, although periodic reviews will occur. Federal law requires comprehensive plans for all national wildlife refuges.

The current draft Plan and a summary can be viewed on the Internet at the Service's Planning Website: <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/uppermiss/>. The draft Plan can also be viewed at 52 public libraries in communities near the refuge, or at refuge district offices in Savanna, Ill., McGregor, Iowa; La Crosse, Wis.; and Winona, Minn. Written comments on the draft Plan will be accepted by the Service until August 31, 2005, at the following address: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Attn: CCP Comment, Room 101, 51 East Fourth Street, Winona, Minn. 55987.

With more than 3 million visitors per year, the "Upper Miss" Refuge is the most visited refuge in the country and has the added complexity of a major navigation system, including 11 locks and dams within its boundary. It is also a world-class fish and wildlife area which harbors 306 species of birds; 119 species of fish; more than 130 active bald eagle nests; thousands of heron and egret nests; spectacular concentrations of canvasback ducks, tundra swans, and white pelicans; and several threatened or endangered species.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance Program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.